The Monumental Impact of a Judy Baca Mural in Los Angeles

A Mellon grant will allow SPARC to extend “The Great Wall” to a full mile in length, bringing the content of the mural up to the present day.

In 1976, Judy Baca began working on “The Great Wall of Los Angeles,” a monumental mural depicting the story of Los Angeles through the lens of interracial harmony. Spreading over 2,700 feet of wall space in the Tujunga Wash of the San Fernando Valley, “The Great Wall” spans pre-historic California to the 1950s, showing a range of historical events, including the Zoot Suit Riots, the fight against the covenant laws in South Central LA, and the internment of Japanese-Americans.
Collaboratively created with local artists, community members, and more than 400 youth during the summers between 1976 and 1983, “The Great Wall” and its nonprofit arm, the **Social and Public Art Resource Center** (SPARC), inspired hundreds of mural projects and educational initiatives across the region. No other organization has had a bigger impact on community mural painting in Southern California — particularly as it relates to Chicanx and Latinx communities — than SPARC.

Over 45 years after its first coat of paint, “The Great Wall” is getting overdue recognition with a $5 million grant from the **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s Monuments Project**. The **Lucas Museum of Narrative Art** also recently acquired **The History of California Archive**, a collection of hundreds of drawings by Baca and her team showing the creation of “The Great Wall.” Though working for decades, SPARC and its significance is finally coming to the fore.

“The work has become timely, but it has always been important,” Judy Baca explained in a phone interview. “More people are beginning to recognize it and need it and are calling for it.”
That work goes beyond just painting. From its beginning, SPARC has been rooted in civic engagement, working with local officials to secure space, tackle preservation, and challenge Los Angeles’s decade-long mural moratorium that was finally lifted in 2013. Whether transforming vacant lots into neighborhood parks or creating large-scale digitally generated murals at their Digital Mural Lab in partnership with the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), their work relies on community dialogue. That ethos is reflected in its process. These aren’t public artworks that go up in days; each work is heavily researched, developed by conducting oral history interviews with historians, activists, and community members, and then executed through a lens of teaching.

There is also the important job of upkeep. Though it never intended to lead conservation efforts, SPARC builds maintenance into its programs. It has developed protective coatings that remove unwanted graffiti and has restored important artworks, like Baca’s 1984 mural “Hitting the Wall” commemorating the first time a women’s marathon was held at the Olympic Games. SPARC also documents historic murals around Los Angeles, particularly in communities where public walls have been embraced for activism.
“Art history has been remiss in not recognizing the [mural] form as a serious art form, one that has played a vital role in art history and one that, in fact, has been a major influence on the city of Los Angeles with the advent of [David Alfaro] Siqueiros’s mural, ‘América Tropical,’ in 1932,” Baca said. Indeed, Siqueiros’s presence in the region and his creation of the Bloc of Mural Painters — a group of young LA artists trained in mural techniques — catalyzed the importance of mural painting in Los Angeles for artistic experimentation and sociopolitical engagement.
By marking and memorializing historical events throughout the landscape of Los Angeles, SPARC’s mural projects continue to expand the legacy of the Mexican Modernists and Chicanx and Civil Rights activists, while educating and inspiring new generations of artists. In doing so, they challenge what a monument is and who it should serve.

Judy Baca, “The Great Wall,” 1930s, 10-by-75-foot segment

“The Great Wall’ is not a site that has been developed and treasured by our city,” Baca said. “Despite that, for all these years it has been a place for visitors from all over the world to travel to and for students and teachers to engage with.” She later added, “Sites of public memory are critical in terms of people knowing who they are — and that’s what ‘The Great Wall’ does.”

The Mellon grant will allow SPARC to extend “The Great Wall” to a full mile in length, bringing the content of the mural cycle up to the present day. While the panels for the 1960s have already been developed through conversations with activists, including Dolores Huerta and the late Tom Hayden, Baca is beginning to source histories and develop sketches for events, including the Chicano Moratorium, women’s liberation movements, recent waves of migration, and even the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, the grant will make the site more accessible by building a 90-foot bridge — called the “Interpretive Green Bridge” — connecting the two sides of the river and acting as a viewing platform. There will also be lighting to illuminate the entire mural and interactive educational stations along the bridge that, through written didactics and audio entries, explain the social and environmental history of Los Angeles through the voices of those who lived it.
“The historical representation on ‘The Great Wall’ is one of minorities and indigenous communities and women’s contributions, which are often not depicted in public space, not memorialized in monuments,” Carlos Rogel, SPARC’s executive director explained in a phone interview. “These interpretative stations will give visitors a way into the subject matter and the history.”

“It’s going to be a place to spend the day,” Baca added. “To take a walk and have a complete review of American history, of Los Angeles history, and the history of the San Fernando Valley.”

But first, they have to develop and create the new panels. To do so, SPARC is looking for a large interior space (preferably an airplane hangar) where a team of artists and
students can execute the murals year-round. SPARC will be able to place the finished panels directly into the site — a far safer option for participants than painting in an active flood control channel. While the finished mural is still years away, the Los Angeles community can watch as the progress steadily unfolds, starting with the lighting of the existing mural later this year.

Judy Baca, “The Great Wall,” 1940s, 10-by-45-foot segment

Meanwhile, all of us can revisit the stories already depicted on “The Great Wall,” like the Chinese Massacre of 1871 or the origins of the gay rights movement in Los Angeles, and consider their continued contribution to history and contemporary social justice movements. “We see this project as part of a cultural recovery for Los Angeles,” Rogel said. “These programs are so tied to bringing back resources, and compassion, and civics, and memory, and history — things that are so important to a healthy democracy.”

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